



# Community Gardens

Exploring Community Gardens in Columbus, Ohio: How to protect them and who they serve.

Green Columbus      April 13, 2021

## Introduction

At first glance, a garden may seem like a small aspect of a community, especially in the face of the affordable housing challenges of Columbus, Ohio. However, through our team's research and interviews, we intend to show the vitality, importance, and lasting community benefits of community gardens. There are many challenges and barriers that threaten urban gardens; our research provides analysis, narrative and recommendations focused on protecting and preserving these sacred places in Columbus. We aim to do this while promoting the communal and institutional support that is essential to urban gardens' longevity.

The photographs seen throughout this platform encompass just a few of the many gardens in the central Ohio area. Our team set out to capture a collection of community gardens from across the city's historically impactful lands, in differing forms and uses, of differing income levels, and in different geographies. Photographing these

spaces in the midst of winter provided a unique landscape and depiction of the gardens. Their dull appearance in this stage may be seen by some as barren land where housing or other developments can flourish year-long, but to other eyes, these spaces can be symbolic of the quiet transformation and behind-the-scenes work required to allow these gardens to flourish in warmer seasons. Whichever your perspective, one cannot deny that these spaces provide a haven within an otherwise concrete jungle.



Bill Dawson, Growing to Green program manager, shares an inspiring message about the importance of community gardens

*Audio Transcript: "Sometimes people don't get along in the real world, put them in a garden setting and they're best friends. They're sharing recipes, they're sharing culture. We create an understanding of each other through food, through fellowship, through hanging out together, through working together, through providing to others...so all those things bring people together" - Bill Dawson*



Kossuth Street Garden

## Kossuth Street Garden

Our project begins with a case study of Kossuth Street Garden (KSG). Kossuth Street Garden was a community garden located in the Southern Orchards neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio, just south of Nationwide Children's Hospital and east of German Village. The land has a rich history of various inhabitants as it was the first sacred ground of the Shawnee people. Then, in the mid-1900s, it became a predominantly Jewish neighborhood comprised of many Holocaust survivors. The parcel of land KSG resides on was once home to a kosher slaughterhouse, Shuman's Meats, which served the employment and kosher needs of the Jewish community. Later, during the Great Migration from Montgomery, Alabama, it developed into a black community for refugees fleeing violence and/or seeking opportunity.

KSG was an integral part of the Southern Orchards community. It provided residents with a green space where they could enjoy nature, freshly-grown food, and community bonding. This space was

especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic as a means to unite the community in a safe outdoor setting. The garden went above and beyond to serve the community in any way it could. Kossuth provided educational experiences for youth and adults through its Little Library, after school programs, collaborations with local universities, and community events such as the annual Earth Day celebration and late summer harvest efforts. Kossuth also worked with the Juvenile Court to help children and teens get into the community and learn hands-on lessons that empowered and instilled respect, love, and care for the earth in them. The garden was a sentimental place for the neighborhood as it hosted memorials for volunteers and activists and contains the cremains of community homicide victims. Apart from these social benefits, Kossuth sustained natural capital via soil regeneration and preservation of birds, bees, and butterflies through its native plant and pollinator sections.

Kossuth Street Garden was established through a verbal agreement between the garden founders and the private owners of the land: The Salvation Army. This informal partnership had few limitations, until recently, when the Salvation Army sold the land to a developer named Tracy Cohen. Kossuth Street Garden had a limited say in the matter because it was never the legal owner of the space. KSG is now listed for eviction in order to pave the way for housing development. The case of Kossuth shows the complex nature of property rights when it comes to community gardens and provides motivation to understand how similar green spaces can avoid the same fate.





Franklinton Farms

## Recommendations and Looking Forward

### Introduction

Our research team entered into the Kossuth Street Garden issue at the critical moment as its fate was finally being decided in the winter and early spring of 2021. The fate of KSG seemed inevitable; however, the community worked tirelessly to make the case for the preservation of their community gem.

In the end, the zoning change for the developer was granted, and the developer is now able to move forward on their building of homes in the Southern Orchards community. Ultimately, KSG had little to no standing, power or right to the land that they were on, in terms of legality and private property rights. In addition, it was an understood fact that the land would eventually be developed.

All this being said, the loss of KSG is still a loss for many members of the community and for Columbus as a whole. The garden

contributed to enriching the Southern Orchards neighborhood and provided countless opportunities for the community-building activity that is difficult to nurture in our rapidly growing metro-area. But, with the loss of KSG comes the possibility to generate the necessary research and understanding in order to support, create and sustain community gardens for the future.

The City of Columbus, Franklin County and a number of for and non-profit entities such as Ohio State, Franklin Park Conservatory, Scotts Miracle Gro, Mid-Ohio Food Collective and the Local Food Board have continued to work in the field of community gardens and food security in Columbus. We acknowledge and applaud the efforts made by these key stakeholders and the work they have put into building the support for community gardens to thrive. Our following recommendations are based on a series of interviews with food systems experts and community stakeholders, and are intended to build upon this work, energy and window of opportunity that the development of Kossuth Street Garden offers. It is our hope that this research may spur the necessary conversations to invest more heavily in this important aspect of the Columbus community.



IE Community Garden

## City and Community Level Recommendations: Land Rights and Access to Land.

## *Increase and bolster land access, tenure, and rights for gardens in Columbus*

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Council Member Hardin on his position on "saving Kossuth Street Garden" and the difficulty of council's position during the March 29th zoning hearing.

*Audio Transcript: "Myself as someone who knows how this council feels about community gardens, I was eager to be a 'yes' to save Kossuth Garden to answer that question in the affirmative. Until I dug into this, and until I was briefed, and until I talked to, and heard, and read the emails and realized that the question is not 'can council save Kossuth Garden's' - it can't. Regardless of our vote, Kossuth Garden is not staying there." - Council Member Shannon Hardin*

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Juliette Bullock - Legal Representative for Tracy Cohen on why Kossuth Street Garden will be developed during the March 29th zoning hearing.

*Audio Transcript: "The real situation here is that this garden was established on a property that they did not own, it is not public property, and they knew that there was a time limit for how long they could stay on this property." - Juliette Bullock*

▶ 00:00 / 00:15 



Listen here to Council Member Tyson on Council's position on community gardens during the March 29th zoning hearing for Kossuth Street Garden.

*Audio Transcript: "I want to certainly share that this council has certainly been committed to community gardens and we recognize that community gardens are a hub for neighborhoods." - Council Member Priscilla Tyson*





Student Farm at Carmack Road

Acquiring land to garden on is the most fundamental and necessary step in the development and sustainability of community gardens in Columbus. As we've seen, the type of land rights that a garden has can quickly decide its fate. However, land is in short supply in Columbus as the need for affordable housing grows every day. This short supply makes private ownership for a low profit venture such as a community garden unlikely and difficult.



Highland Youth Garden

This challenge requires flexibility, responsive government and community which can support these valuable ventures. The city is an active partner for community gardens and this partnership has in part already taken hold in the form of Land Bank leases, formal city-

brokered agreements with faith organizations, permission to garden on government-owned property, and individual donations. The city is working to create space for gardens and to balance the need for housing with the need for green space. In our interview with Cheryl Graffagnino, the Local Food Systems Strategy Coordinator at the Department of Public Health in the City of Columbus, she stated that:

“We're (The City of Columbus) not Cleveland and we're not Detroit, we don't have tens of thousands of vacant properties. We have 1800 vacant lots and Cleveland has 30,000 and Detroit many more. As much as folks might think, we don't have the number of lots that they think we do.”



Team member Will Sharp taking photographs, Franklin Farms

Ms. Graffagnino made clear that the city was working to balance the affordable housing crunch with green space, which she hopes would come to include community gardens.



The city and the community are integral partners in creating ways that gardeners can acquire land. In an interview with Shelly Casto, executive director of Highland Youth Garden, she discusses how the Columbus Land Bank is an additional resource of the city that has been exceptionally useful in her experience:

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Shelly Casto on the value of the  
Columbus Land Bank to urban  
gardeners

*Transcript - "The land bank is, in my experience, on a couple levels, a great asset for the city and great community partners for things like urban gardening, so I want to lift up that program through the city; we're*

*lucky we have it." - Shelly Casto*

This funding and support stream reduces competition from investors interested in the land, which could allow a community garden to occupy the land for several years. It can be seen that there are important steps being taken to help gardeners acquire stable, secure land in order to commit to gardens. Some further suggestions we offer are:

1. Further engage in the implementation of the Local Food Action Plan and secure the necessary land to achieve its goal of increasing food security and sustainability.
2. Extend land bank leases from one year to five years in order to encourage sustainability and long-term planning for gardens.
3. Provide low interest down payments or loans to minority gardeners who wish to purchase land. Sell Land Bank properties at below market rate to gardeners who commit to 5 year leases.
4. Create a single pathway, interactive tool with which prospective gardeners and groups can examine Land Bank properties (such as the map that currently exists) that have been selected for urban agriculture by the City. An example would be the Detroit Future Cities ["Working With Lots"](#) program.
5. Create a policy ecosystem to enable community members to purchase land cooperatively, where decisions could be made by a board or committee about the destination and purpose of the plot.

6. Reduce the amount of tax abatements given to housing developers who fail to develop relevant affordable housing as Carlie Boos said in a recent article:

“Creating an affordable housing incentive program was the right move for Columbus three years ago,” said Carlie Boos, AHACO Executive Director. “But we’re three years older, three years smarter, and we know the policy needs to evolve. This program has the potential to create safe homes for our essential workers, our aging parents, and families escaping homelessness, but it’s not there yet.”

A link to the City of Columbus and Franklin County Local Food Action Plan, which gardens play a key role in, is [here](#).



Team member Liz Heneghan at Carmack, Truck in Franklinton

# Funding and Income Streams

## *Increase City Investment and Diverse Garden Funding Streams*

During the March 29th zoning hearing over the Kossuth Street plot where KSG resided, Council member Tyson noted that the city had devoted \$385k in funding over the last ten years to community gardens and intends to devote \$70k in 2021 to the development of gardens.



Council member Tyson on her own, councils, and the city's future support for gardens during the March 29th zoning hearing for Kossuth Street.

*Audio Transcript: "Community gardens are very important to me. I was the first person to fund community gardens in the city of Columbus. As I said earlier, we have committed over \$382,000 to community gardens, and in 2020 we collaborated with Scotts Miracle Grow, and Franklin Park conservatory will now join together with Scotts Miracle Grow, the City, and the County for gardens. In 2020 we were able to give gardens to 72 community gardens for the amount of, in total, \$76,000; Scotts gave \$32,000. In 2021, we're planning on providing \$99,000 (almost \$99, 551) in grants, for approximately \$30,000 from Scotts Miracle Grow to 70 additional gardens. And then again, we gave some alternatives, as I mentioned, Land Bank properties." - Council Member Priscilla Tyson*

However, in the market that exists in Columbus for land, and with the overhead costs that come from starting a garden, this sum is welcome, but too low to sustain future development of gardens in Columbus. The primary struggle for gardeners in Columbus, outside of land, is the acquisition of funds that are stable and consistent. Most, are just that, gardeners, who are often unpaid volunteers who devote much of their own personal funds into their projects.



Bexley Community Garden Greenspace



Bexley Community Garden,  
Franklinton

In the City of Cleveland, the Summer Sprout program from the Ohio State University Extension agency of Cuyahoga County, is funded and paid for largely by the leveraging of Community Development Block Grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In a short phone interview with the program coordinator of Summer Sprout, we learned that the program has received \$125,000 per year for the

past 3 years and operated around 155 to 165 community gardens. It is unclear if this avenue has been explored by the City of Columbus, but this is a powerful use of federal funds which can catalyze green community development in urban concrete jungles. Community Development Block Grants are intended for “Construction of public facilities and improvements, such as water and sewer facilities,

streets, neighborhood centers, and the conversion of school buildings for eligible purposes” and:

“Each activity must meet one of the following national objectives for the program: benefit low- and moderate-income persons, prevention or elimination of slums or blight, or address community development needs having a particular urgency because existing conditions pose a serious and immediate threat to the health or welfare of the community for which other funding is not available.”



Bexley Community Garden

Community gardens and urban agriculture are a clear synthesis of all of these goals and needs. The city and educational institution partnership models in Cleveland can be replicated in Columbus to bolster community gardens and secure and increase the pot of funding available to support

struggling gardens.

Finally, the city and institutions within the city play a major role in the local food economy as purchasers of food and products for their employees, staff and students. Angela Blatt, InFACT program coordinator at Ohio State, described to our team an innovative program currently being tested by Ohio State, the Buckeye ISA program. Buckeye ISA or institutionally supported agriculture, provides funding, resources and start up materials to 94 lower income families in 7 different neighborhoods in the city. Ohio State then purchases the food and goods from them in order to support them and acquire local food in order to meet Ohio State's 40% locally sourced food goals. The City of Columbus and other institutions can play a central role in connecting producers to



consumers and providing incentives and the legal protections to allow gardeners to sell their goods on residential lots in order to support these ventures.



4th Street Farms

## Management, Organization and Intention

### The Value And Sustainability Of Communi...

Theresa Martin of The Greater Columbus Growing Coalition, Bill Dawson of the Franklin Conservatory an...

<https://cpa.ds.npr.org/s566/audio/2021/04/allsides210401hr2-mixdown.mp3>

*Solidify Organization and Management at the City and Garden level*

When asked in her interview on *All Sides with Ann Fisher* about who is her "go to" person for community gardens in the city and the county, Theresa Martin of Greater Columbus Growing Coalition had this to say:



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00:00 / 00:25

Theresa Martin on "All Sides with Ann Fisher" discussing Kossuth Street Garden

*Audio Transcript: "Theresa Martin, when you talk about these issues, or when you think about them, who do you identify as your city partner in planning ahead on this stuff; or city or county or whatever the regional partner is?" - Ann Fisher "Yeah well..thats a hard question actually." - Theresa Martin*

Clearly, this shouldn't be a hard question. This issue was one raised not only by Theresa Martin, but individuals interviewed at Green Columbus, The City of Columbus and in gardens in the city. Who is the contact person at the city, who manages and organizes community gardens? Who keeps track of how many exist? Who settles disputes, organizes prospective gardeners, vets questions and directs citizen gardeners to the resources when they call the city for help?

▶ 00:00 / 00:32 🔴



Program manager of Franklin Farms, Bill Dawson, shares how the City of Columbus can assist community gardens

*Audio Transcript: "I'd love to see city departments be able to help more staffing-wise with whether its Rec and Parks who takes the tiller out to till some of the gardens or forestry to help with planting trees, which they do at times, either giving you wood chips if there's trees available, taking down trees in these lots that are dangerous or shading gardens that the tree's not serving a useful purpose, or its damaged..." - Bill Dawson*

Leadership and management heavily influences the outcome of a community garden. At the garden level, timely, planned decisions quickly determine the longevity of the garden, such as with Kossuth. At Kossuth, development was always a threat and fact but garden management either chose not to, or failed to take steps to secure the future of the garden in its current location or at another location. This could have been done in the form of written legal documentation or in the form of another location which afforded more rights.

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Bill Dawson, of Franklin Farms, shares the significance of strong leadership in community gardens

*Audio Transcript: "There was no one else there to really manage and be that passionate core group, so I always encourage gardeners to have a strong core group and then grow their circle, be ready to hand the reigns over and the Growing to Green resource guide over, and the information over to the next garden leader. So that's critical in having that leadership." - Bill Dawson*

We can look to examples of comparable cities to see that as the population grows, you do need councils, offices and committees

that manage particular topics such as:

- In the City of Austin, city council leaders created the The Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Garden Program (SUACG) in 2009 with the intention to "establish a single point of contact and streamline the process for establishing community gardens and sustainable urban agriculture on city land."
- As previously mentioned, the Summer Sprout program in Cleveland, Ohio acts as this central entity for gardens in the City of Cleveland. The Summer Sprout program supplies technical knowledge, training, supplies and assistance to gardeners looking to acquire land to garden on, 40% of which are on land bank properties. Additionally, Summer Sprout assists, trains, tracks and takes responsibility for its enrolled community gardens as a clear centralized and managed entity for the city and community members to utilize and seek out for information.

It has now come time, as the number of gardens and the demand for land have both increased, for the city to create a similar council, group, or staffed position that would act as the central directing entity for gardens in Columbus. This entity would field questions, handle disputes and keep track of gardens in Columbus and would enable the city to better perceive conflicts before they arrived at City Council. According to the Local Food Board's website, the board exists to:

“Provide intellectual, physical, social, and/or monetary capital. These are leaders in our community who can achieve results and increase awareness of food related issues among decision makers in our community.”

This board's responsibilities and funding could be expanded to handle and direct the necessary resources for gardeners and gardens in the city, in order to become the centralized entity that is necessary to streamline help and clarify the actions of the city in regard to it's policies and initiatives on gardens.





Grandview Community Garden

## Work with stakeholders to generate a data and benchmarking analysis tool

In our interview with Cheryl Graffagnino, Local Food Systems Strategies Coordinator for the City of Columbus, she made it clear that one of her, and thus the city's, biggest needs was a standardized, data driven, benchmark analysis tool which would enable her and the city to understand exactly what gardens are doing for Columbus. She states that:

“I would love to see all the community gardens demonstrate how they impact the community, how the residents feel about the community and the garden, their impact; that could go a long way...a



way to say that they (the garden) made *this* many connections in the neighborhood, how many residents live in the area, how many gardens there actually are and what their results are”

In a city where housing needs loom heavily over all development decisions, as made evident to us in all of our interviews, it is essential that gardens and their advocates are able to speak directly to the benefits that they offer the city. One example of such a tool is the Farming Concrete Toolkit.



Old Towne East Gardens

The Farming Concrete website states:

“The Farming Concrete Toolkit is a way to help measure all of the good things growing in your farm, garden, or yard, from hot peppers to happiness. Urban farmers and gardeners contribute every day to the social and environmental health of their communities. The Toolkit helps you track

your output to showcase the benefits of your farm or garden, to improve and share your practice, and to raise awareness of your impact to funders and policymakers.”

This data tool kit can track:

### **Food Production Data**

- Crop and harvest counts

### **Environmental Data**

- Rainwater harvesting,
- Storm-water diversion
- Landfill diversion
- Composted materials

### **Social Data**

- Participation numbers by task, skill, geography and projects
- Characteristics of participants
- Skills and knowledge taught at the garden
- Reach of garden programs

### **Health Data**

- Vegetable and Fruit attitudes
- Moods and perceptions of safety in and around the garden
- Healthy eating habits
- Hours of exercise

### **Economic Data**

- Market sales
- Donations of food

The Farming Concrete Toolkit and other programs like it could be widely beneficial for community gardens in Columbus and beyond. Not only would it benefit growers, but it would also be a way for

cities, foundations, and communities to track data on how gardens are directly impacting their neighborhoods and communities.

## Conclusion

The story of community gardens in Columbus, Ohio is complex. While much of the city's goals and plans make room for green space, and efforts have been put in place, there is much more that could and needs to be done in this window of opportunity. The city is developing faster than it can manage at times, and there are incentives in place to increase profits for investors, generate revenue and gain a tax base in order to build more housing. In every community, there needs to be a balance of how to grow without losing cultural value and long term residents, all while centering the wants and needs of the community. Opportunity zones and tax abatements incentivize land development, increasing profits to private investors, while spreading the costs across taxpayers. Gentrification, housing developments, new apartments, and restaurants are appearing where communities once stood, displacing many people to new communities. Green-space, urban gardens, and flora are becoming ever more difficult to find in low-income communities.

For these reasons, our group stands behind our recommendations. These recommendations were produced through direct interviews with those closely involved in decision making about community gardens and those who work and manage them. We are confident that by increasing city investment, through increased grant funding or the exploration of the CDBG program and sales, gardens will have the necessary capital to get started and stay operational. Through programs like the Land Bank, Columbus has opened the opportunity to garden for groups who otherwise would never have had access to land. In addition to this, simple steps can be taken, such as extending leases, helping gardeners secure their land rights, and creating more pathways for land acquisition, which will keep gardens rooted in place. With the creation of a dedicated City position or committee to assist, lead and manage gardens in the city, the city council's intentions to support gardens can be solidified and given the platform needed to be implemented. This position would be amplified and justified by a standardized data collection platform, which would give gardens the credit they deserve for the

countless benefits they generate in communities throughout Columbus.

Kossuth Street Garden was lost to development, but there is hope and energy for gardens in the future of the City of Columbus. Local leadership, social responsibility, land access, zoning, and city and regional policies all play into the protection and generation of community gardens. Urban gardens are community assets that not only provide nutritious food and educational value to those near the garden, but also a safe space and a tool to combat urban issues. All of the gardens included in this case study, though geographically dispersed across the city, are each deeply connected in their beauty, benefits to the community, and their life-giving attributes.

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